DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 194 242 RC 012 276

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TITLE Teaching About Women in Hispanic Literature: Current Methods and Materials.
PUB DATE Dec 79
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Modern Language Association (San Francisco, CA, December 1979).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Authors: Discussion (Teaching Technique); *Females: Feminism: Higher Education: *Hispanic American Literature: *Instructional Materials; Latin American Literature: Spanish: Spanish Literature: *Teacher Role: *Teaching Methods: Womens Studies
IDENTIFIERS Rich (Adrienne)

ABSTRACT

Awareness of a new and altered method of teaching literature, similar to that described by Adrienne Rich, grew from the experience of teaching a small introductory course in twentieth century Hispanic women writers to students with diverse language, cultural, and economic backgrounds. Although about half the students were native Spanish speakers, the material seemed foreign to them. As is often the case with women's studies classes, the works studied were also "antihierarchical", or outside the usual support system of back-up material. Therefore, student response and discussion were minimal until after the instructor had attempted to relate the material and weave a context for it as she saw fit. The particulars of each writer appeared unimportant until the students could detect individual voices among the writers. Returning to and rereading texts in order to compare the authors and their different uses of similar situations and themes gave the students the chance to discern a "female voice" in contemporary Hispanic literature. (SB)

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CN003475

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December 1979

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# Teaching about Women in Hispanic Literature: Current Methods and Materials

My comments for this presentation arose from a course I developed and taught, in Spanish, about twentieth-century Hispanic women writers, both Peninsular and Latin American. Because I had been impressed by Adrienne Rich's brief introduction to an anthology of twentieth-century women's poetry in translation called The Other Voice (ed. Joanna Bankier et al., New York: W.W. Norton, 1976) and by many of the poems in that anthology, I decided to use its title for my class. As I think back on that choice, I realize now even more than I did at the time I chose it that the title appealed to me because it reminds us that poetry is language, speech, and it expressed my hope that students would learn to hear and begin to dialogue with a voice that has not always seemed very outspoken in Hispanic literature, a voice that has often gone unheeded even when it did speak.

This was an introductory course, and the question of materials was solved without too much extra effort. Availability of texts was an initial consideration, but helped by reference works like Female Studies IX. Teaching about Women in the Foreign Languages (ed. Sidonie Cassirer, Old Westbury, New York: The Feminist Press, 1875) and Meri Knaster's annotated bibliography of Women in Spanish America (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1977), I made extensive use of inter-library loan. Once I knew what

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materials I could count on, I considered them in terms of my students' interests and abilities. Thirteen students had enrolled in the course. Only a few were Spanish majors; some were international studies majors, others were from business, engineering, journalism. Their language ability was equally varied: about half the students were native speakers of Spanish; the others were North Americans who read and spoke with very different degrees of proficiency. I was determined to conduct the class in Spanish and therefore I tried to select readings that would challenge the Latino students without being too difficult for the North Americans. I wanted the readings to represent varied moments from the twentieth century, and I also wanted them to be drawn from as many Hispanic countries as possible. I ended up having the students purchase two novels--María Luisa Bombal's La última niebla, which also contains several short stories, and Carmen Laforet's Nada. The other texts were either photocopied or mimeographed. And the amount of reading was just about right, although some students had more difficulty than others. I actually enjoyed the freedom to match materials and students, choosing--for example--Julia de Burgos because all of the Latino students were Puerto Rican, although only one of them had ever read any of her poems. My personal preparation was difficult at times because almost everything I read had to be ordered through inter-library loan, and the arrival of materials was often poorly timed. Those problems, however, were surmountable. (In addition, they are problems that Electa and Linda have discussed in considerable detail.)

In the long run, I found that the most challenging aspect of the Women Writer's course was not the search for materials but the class itself, and I would like to call your attention to the word "methods" in

the title of this session. Although my students (most of whom were women) found the readings interesting, they did not respond immediately in the open, excited way I had anticipated. They seemed to respect and enjoy my enthusiasm, but rather silently; so that at least initially there were few of the polemical discussions I had hoped for. Some of this silence--indeed perhaps much of it--can be attributed to the wide range of language ability and the divergence of cultural background among my students. North American students were quite unfamiliar with Hispanic attitudes and society; Latino students were of course familiar with Hispanic attitudes, but many of them had never examined those attitudes critically. In spite of their cultural differences, however, and even though the material was new to the two groups in different ways, all of the students seemed to find the works "foreign." Since there is not a women's studies program at Bradley, none of them had taken a "women's" course before. They empathized with the women writers and female characters and agreed that in general women have had and still have greater professional difficulties than most men, but they lacked a wider context for placing our readings and discussions. They often found the works heavy and unnecessarily depressing, and few of them could identify with the women we read about and discussed. Some of that distance was historical (the 30's 40's and 50's are now history) and some of it was economic (most of the students were from middle-class and upper middle-class families, whether from Puerto Rico or Illinois). For example, even the very "modern" narrator of Marta Lynch's "Latin Lover" sounded unfamiliar to them and they were quite critical of her directness and her behavior. They were also rather disapproving of the film "Simplemente Jenny" because it presented a very harsh view of middle and upper-middle class Latin America,

which many students found offensive because they felt it showed only the "negative" side of Latin American life. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that we had our best classes when we discussed the work of María Luisa Bombal. The students found her work difficult but poignant; they forgave its sadness because they found it beautiful and poetic.

On the basis of this course, the reactions I have just described, and your own experiences, I would like you to think for a moment about the following question: are there some methods more appropriate than others for presenting Hispanic women writers? Or--to phrase the question another way--does the literature itself give rise to a particular style of teaching that we might call a "feminist" method? Even though I realize that it is difficult to discuss theory in such a short period of time and that this question calls for a long-range answer based on extensive thought and experience, I suggest that we begin to discuss it as a group. In order to focus the discussion somewhat, I will venture an affirmative--although tentative answer--and, once again using my own class as an example, I will describe one method that worked rather well with my students.

The question of methods returns us to the title and purpose of the class: as we read these texts a silence is broken and another voice long squelched by tradition is permitted to speak. This is a significant act, one that I believe we could, even name antihierarchical, recalling a statement Adrienne Rich makes in an article entitled "Toward a Woman-Centered University," which she has included in her new book On Lies, Secrets and Silence (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979): "It has been almost a given of women's courses that style and content are inseparable. A style has evolved in the classroom, more dialectic, more exploratory, less

given to pseudo-objectivity, then the traditional mode. . . . The underlying mode of the feminist teaching style is thus by nature anti-hierarchical" (pp. 134 and 145). For teaching and discussing these "other" voices or words (many of which have not been thoroughly appraised--much less ordered--by critics and confererences) places both students and instructor in an unfamiliar territory. At the very least, it as an extra-hierarchical situation, outside the usual back-up system of introductory articles, summaries and encyclopedias. There are few published articles to fall back on and put on reserve to direct out-of-class reading, few texts beyond the texts themselves. Not only has the instructor very likely mimeographed her own materials, now she must weave them together, not guided by traditional definitions and limits but led by her own perceptions and the voice she has discerned in the words themselves.

Given this newness of both materials and method, student silence can be expected, although it seems ironic in a class like this one where I wanted to encourage discussion, where on principle the right to a voice was an integral part of the course itself. Somewhat paradoxically, then, the instructor's role was especially important, since only as the "other" voice we were listening for became familiar could students respond comfortably. What I learned as the semester went on was that discussion could follow my presentation but never precede it. Students had to see me in action, so to speak, before they would venture much comment. I found that what most interested them and encouraged their participation was my effort to connect the texts. As often as possible we returned to and re-read texts we had already discussed, comparing writers and their very different uses of similar situations and themes, working out

in a very unsystenatic way a comment Adrienne Rich makes in her foreward to The Other Voice: "The idea of a common female culture --splintered and diasporized among the male cultures under and within which women have survived--has been a haunting though tentative theme of feminist thought over the past few years" (p. xvii).And as the editors of that anthology remind us, for much of world literature (certainly for much of Hispanic literature) we are still in the introductory stages of discovering a female voice. Attention must be paid to historical context and aesthetic evaluation, but that attention is possible only as the voice is truly heard.

In my own class, I found that the particulars of each writer (which I always presented when we began to read the work of a new author) were only meaningful to students when they could begin to distinguish individual voices in relation to other writers. It was only in "chorus" that we managed to balance Hispanic history and/or place and the common female culture that Rich mentions in The Other Voice. Our best discussions arose from re-reading and comparison: for example, we read Gabriela Mistral's "El encuentro" when we studied Alfonsina Storni's poem of the same title; we talked about music in Marta Brunet's "Soledad de la sangre" and María Luisa Bombal's "El árbol"; we compared Gabriela Mistral's "La otra" to the conversation Julia de Burgos has with her double in "A Julia de Burgos"; we returned to the fog in La última niebla and Yolanda's sleep-like state in "Las islas nuevas" when we discussed Andrea's confusion and self-absorption in Nada. I also presented the work of some English-language poets when I believed that I heard a similar voice, in spite of difference in language or time. We read two of Denise Levértov's poems ("In Mind

and "The Women") with "La otra" of Gabriela Mistral, and with Alfonsina Storni's poems we read poems of Sylvia Plath, Ntozake Shange and the Chicana poet Ana Castillo. I also juxtaposed Violeta Parra's voice with that of Gabriela Mistral, and I invited Phyllis Janik, an Illinois writer who was on campus as part of a poets' workshop, to talk with the students about being a woman writer. These were the relations that I felt best opened the class and most encouraged discussion. They are also, I believe, the exercises that best suggest an altered way of teaching literature, one that listens attentively to "other" voices and, on the basis of what it hears, weaves a context for those voices to be appreciated and evaluated critically.

My own experience indicates that such a context can only result from the dialectic, exploratory teaching described by Adrienne Rich. I look forward to hearing your comments and learning about some of the ways you have presented Hispanic women writers and helped students to respond to such powerful material. For as Alfonsina Stornia suggests in her poem, "Bien pudiera ser"/ "It May Well Be," the words she has finally spoken release years of embittered, tilating passivity and <u>silence</u>; it may not be easy to begin a dialogue.